The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

No. 31 MAY 29th, 1940

DEAR MEMBER,

When these words are read the day of national prayer and dedication will have passed. If the act has been real it will be no passing experience but the beginning of a new dedication to the things of the spirit. The prayer which we incline to offer is that we may somehow be saved as we are. But what we are bound as Christians to pray for is that we may put our lives in God's hands to be re-made and used by Him to re-make the society in which He has placed us. The unloosing of the powers of the abyss—of the primitive and savage passions which Christian civilisation has in some measure tamed and held in check—calls for an answering heroism. The restoration of health to society will be a long and costly process. It will demand a certain quality of life. It can come about only as men and women re-discover in experience how to live as the responsible and disciplined sons of God.

EACH FOR ALL

Parliament last week passed in less than three hours a bill which, as *The Times* said in a leading article "comes near to suspending the very essence of the constitution as it has been built up in a thousand years." The decision to introduce the measure is said to have been taken on the morning of the day in which it was enacted. It requires all persons to place themselves, their services and their property at the disposal of the King. The act responds to the wishes of the nation. In contrast with the selfish individualism of the past, it is a move towards a real community. The basis of a human society is an unreserved dedication of men to one another.

But the surrender of our all for the safety and good of the country is, in itself, only something which the Nazis already have. No power can continue to exist which is wholly evil, and the Nazi system is sustained by this element of good in it. The question which must concern us is how our own act of a free people can be distinguished from the Nazi system. We may give to the State as representing the community our lives and property when they are needed, but what we cannot give to any earthly authority is our loyalty to God. It is this distinction which we must keep vividly before our minds, since responsibility to God is the basis and buttress of all true liberty. In war the tension between the surrender of ourselves to our fellow men and the community for the love of God, and obedience to God, who is Judge of the nation and all its acts, as the highest service we can render to our people is unceasing. Let us pray for one another.

THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

It should not dismay us, but should rather confirm us in our faith, when we see the pass to which men are brought after losing belief in an absolute standard of truth and right.

As is well said in the last number of *The Coracle*, the organ of the Iona Community (Rev. George MacLeod, Community House, Iona, by Oban. Price 6d.), "The tremendous truth emerges again that Christianity in its fulness alone can be relied on to conserve the individual as being of any moment at all. Man's only claim to a place of honour lies in the fact that Christ died for him. That used to sound merely a parson's phrase; but we read it to-day with an altogether new interest when we realise that it is precisely in those countries where they care nothing for Christ's death, that in an incredibly short space of time they also care nothing for a man's life. Literally and urgently the fact stands out that the 'rights of the individual' are going no longer to depend on the 'natural decencies of man,' nor on the acts of the legislature, nor some vague 'inevitable progress,' but on the vitality of the Christian Faith."

In this connection a passage in a remarkable address given recently at Derby by Miss Dorothy L. Sayers deserves to be pondered: "The brutal fact is that in this Christian country not one person in a hundred has the faintest notion what the Church teaches about God or man or society or the person of Jesus Christ. If you think I am exaggerating, ask the army chaplains.

"Apart from a possible one per cent. of intelligent and instructed Christians, there are three kinds of people we have to deal with. There are the frank and open heathens, whose notions of Christianity are a dreadful jumble of rags and tags of Bible anecdote and clotted mythological nonsense. There are the ignorant Christians, who combine a mild gentle-Jesus sentimentality with vaguely humanistic ethics—most of these are Arian heretics. Finally, there are the more or less instructed church-goers who know all the arguments about divorce, auricular confession and Communion in two kinds, but are about as well-equipped to do battle on fundamentals against a Marxian atheist or a Wellsian agnostic as a boy with a pea-shooter facing a fan-fire of machine-guns.

"Theologically, this country is at present in a state of utter chaos, established in the name of religious toleration, and rapidly degenerating into the flight from reason and the death of hope. However unpopular I may make myself, I shall and will affirm that the reason why the Churches are discredited to-day is, not that they are too bigoted about theology, but that they have run away from theology."

The address by Miss Sayers will be published shortly by Messrs. Hodder and Stoughton as a sixpenny pamphlet entitled *Creed or Chaos.*

THE SUPPLEMENT

The Supplement this week is an important contribution towards a renewed understanding of what the Christian faith is. Most people in this country, so far as they think about the Christian faith at all, take for granted that it is concerned with what we *ought* to be or do, whereas essentially and primarily it is an assertion about something vastly more important—about what *is.*

The writer of the Supplement, Dr. C. H. Dodd, is Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge University. He has written a number of books, among the most important of which are *The Apostolic Preaching* (Hodder and Stoughton. 5s.) and *History and the Gospel* (Nisbet. 6s.).

AN ORDER OF CHRISTIAN CHIVALRY

Nothing that has been said in recent months seems to me of greater importance than the broadcast talk by Mr. Middleton Murry, published in *The Listener* of May 23rd. His diagnosis of the present situation is profound and unanswerable. The fundamental issue for the future of mankind is how a large machine-society can be controlled towards Christian and human ends. Speaking as a democrat, Mr. Murry

does not believe that democracy as we have known it in the past can exercise that control. The burden is felt by the ordinary man to be too great, and he is ready to surrender it to those who will take it. At the present stage of man's mental and spiritual development only an élite, Mr. Murry believes, is capable of the comprehensive vision and the resolute shouldering of responsibility that are required. He suggests, therefore, the formation of a new lay order of Christians, who will learn to trust one another and are prepared to live according to a severe standard of austerity and frugality, and to accept responsibility. The purpose of the brotherhood would be to educate itself for responsible leadership, and that education must begin with a strict self-discipline in living.

The issues raised by Mr. Murry are of central importance, and I hope to return to them again before long.

AMERICAN CHRISTIANS AND THE WAR

I have had a cablegram from my friend, Professor Van Dusen, of Union Theological Seminary, New York, stating that a manifesto has been issued by thirty signatories urging complete moral and material support for the Allies. I have little doubt that the signatories are in the main those who issued the manifesto quoted in News-Letter No. 15. I expect that the text of the manifesto and the names of the signatories are being sent by post. Mails from America at the present time are slow. It may be a week or two before they arrive.

RELIGION IN RUSSIA

In an issue of *Pravda* in March it is reported that the religious movement among Communist youth has begun to "contaminate even the leadership of the Comsomol." An example is quoted of one of the leaders of the military preparation of youth who asked the Comsomol Committee to release him from his duties, "for I am a believer and can no longer be a member of the Comsomol." Another instance is that of a girl in a secondary school who acts as leader of the Comsomol in her class. She is well versed in Marxism and Leninism, and is specially devoted to the study of natural sciences. All this has not prevented her, however, from becoming passionately interested in religious questions.

THE RELIGIOUS CONFLICT IN GERMANY

I strongly recommend a book called *The Village on the Hill* by John Maarten, which has just been published by the Student Christian Movement Press (3s. 6d.). It is a moving account of the struggle between the Confessional Church and the Nazi Party. The story is charmingly told, and the simple narrative, based on first-hand experience, of what took place in a particular village gives a vivid picture of the issues involved and how different individuals reacted to them.

A WORD FROM FRANCE

Some of you probably know the name of the Abbé Couturier. He has been very active in recent years in the cause of Christian unity. His *Semaines de l'Union* at Lyons in which Anglicans, Protestants and Orthodox as well as Roman Catholics have taken part, have attracted much attention. He has great vision and a profound understanding of the possibilities of a movement of prayer. Belief in prayer is common to all Christians. The originality of the Abbé is that he has thrown himself into the plan with the fervour of a saint and has succeeded in banding together an immense

number of devout souls, groups of dedicated men and women and religious communities all over the world into a crusade of prayer for reunion. An address of his has been published as a small booklet entitled *The Universal Prayer of Christians for Christian Unity* (Pax House, 33, Victoria Street, London, S.W.1. 6d.), which one of our members refers to in a recent letter as " the deepest and most creative spiritual treatment of the fundamental problem of to-day." I take from another paper of his the following passage which is appropriate to our present experiences:

" We know with absolute certitude that the events in this world, the most vast and most tragic in which the nations confront one another, as well as the most minute and the most insignificant which are the ordinary experience of our personal life, are all charged with the divine. God who, as St. John tells us, is Love has created this marvel, beyond which love could do nothing more, of making something like Himself, that is to say of creating free persons. None the less He remains the Creator, the Lord, the Father. Without relaxation He impels from within all His creation, in which He is immanent, towards the summing up of all things in His Christ who gives back all to Him in his Person, in the peace, the joy and the unity of the Spirit.

" This creation proceeds in such a way that from that which dies life is unceasingly reborn. Every Passion, every Calvary, every Sepulchre opens on the hope, the certitude and the glory of a Resurrection."

TOWARDS £500

I should like to thank most warmly all those members who have sent us donations towards the increased cost of postage. The amount received is now £268 5s. 1½d. The gifts, which are many, include one of £50. But there is still a deficit of a little over £230 to be met before we can wipe out this unforeseen liability. I hope that those members who have not yet responded and who can afford to do so will send a donation towards the extra postage we are obliged to pay on their News-Letters. Some may be willing, as many have already done, to send a larger amount than is needed to cover the postage of their own subscription in order to help their less well-to-do fellow-members. If so, the whole amount could be raised immediately and a quick wiping out of the deficit would relieve our minds of a real anxiety.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

Changes of Address. — Would any subscribers who are about to change their address be so kind as to let us know this a full week in advance. A good deal of work is required before our records, addressograph plates and envelopes have all been corrected.

Subscriptions. — The rate of subscriptions is 12s. 6d. ($3.0 in U.S.A. and Canada) for one year, and 6s. 6d. ($1.50 in U.S.A. and Canada) for six months, and 3s. 6d. for three months.

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The Supplement
No. 31

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THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE PRESENT SITUATION

By C. H. DODD

"The Lord is king for ever and ever."
"The Lord reigneth; let the earth rejoice."
"The Lord hath established His throne in the heavens, and His kingdom ruleth over all."

That is an affirmation fundamental to any real belief in God. Christians are committed to it by their confession: "I believe in one God, the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible." Earth no less than heaven is the sphere of God's kingdom, where His will is done.

When, however, we consider the actual state of the world, the question arises whether this is what we believe, or only what we wish to believe. The world does not look like a kingdom of God at the present moment. No doubt this generation has struck a bad patch; but a great deal of history is not inaptly described as "a record of the crimes, vices and foibles of mankind." Is God's will done in such a world?

We shall do well to remind ourselves that the affirmations of the Bible and the Creed are made in full view of the fact that mankind is a "fallen" race. That is to say, man is estranged from the purpose of his creation. The fact is set forth in the old story of Adam and the forbidden fruit: man, God's creature, sets himself up in defiance of the will of his Creator, and "brought death into the world and all our woe." For the essential truth of the story we need look no farther than the history of the last twenty-five years: defiance of the divine law has brought death into the world, on a large scale. If God is King, he has rebellious subjects.

In face of all this, however, we continue to affirm, "His kingdom ruleth over all." By that we do not mean merely that some day and somewhere God's kingdom will be a reality, and that "it will all come right in the end." Certainly we Christians believe that the end of our troubled career (for individuals and for the race) lies in a world very different from the one we know. But we do not intend to defer the Kingdom of God either to heaven or to Utopia. Both lie beyond history as we know it. If our belief in the Kingdom of God is to be a living faith, and our prayer for it a prayer that expresses an urgent need, then the Kingdom of God must be a reality accessible to us now, within history. God himself is eternal. In His ageless being there is no past, present or future. In "heaven," the eternal world, the Kingdom of God just *is*. But we pray that it may *come*. History is made up of movement, of coming and going: in history the Kingdom of God "comes." History is made up of action: God acts in history. He acts in relation to the evil things we men have done and continue to do. He acts as King—that is to say, He deals effectively with the evil things which challenge His rule. The Kingdom of God, therefore, as a reality in history, is a matter of movement, of action, of conflict and of victory.

JUDGMENT AND REDEMPTION

The action of God towards "fallen" humanity is to be seen in two aspects, a negative and a positive: in the language of the Bible, judgment and redemption.

It was the work of the Hebrew prophets to

interpret the calamities which befell their people as the judgment of God upon their wickedness. We may think that the prophets sometimes unduly simplified the matter. But it is true that a persistent course of evil actions, upon the large stage of history, leads to disaster in the end. The disaster may involve those who are innocent of the evil: it usually does. It appears to be a law of history that crime leads to crime, and the whole situation goes from bad to worse, until all who stand within it are overcome by calamity. That, said the prophets, is how God's judgment works upon the situation. That is not to say that God sets out to make men smart for their sins to His greater glory. The judgment is the inevitable and even automatic working-out of evil courses. The calamity which follows upon continued wrongdoing shows that sin is an undesirable alien in God's realm, and lies under His ban. But within the disastrous situation God is working for the redemption of His people.

By redemption the prophets commonly mean God's deliverance of His people from oppression, and a new opening of freedom and opportunity for them to serve Him in their corporate life. The greatest and most spiritual of them, Jeremiah, describes it as a "new covenant" (that is to say, a new set of relationships between God and men), in which He forgives and forgets their past sins, and writes His law in their hearts. To this Ezekiel adds that it will work out in a practical reconstruction of the national life sanctified by obedience to the law of God. This actually happened, in part; for the Jewish community after the Exile is a new thing in history, both from a religious and from a sociological standpoint.

Whatever the prophets may say about the divine action towards men in assertion of His kingship over them, is governed by the maxim, "Behold, I create a new thing in the earth." The evil that has been done, with its disastrous consequences, is overcome through the grace and power of God, and a new field of opportunity is set before men. Given the world as it is, the new departure would not have been possible, but for the disastrous situation out of which it emerged. At the same time it is not in any direct sense a development out of that situation. There is an incalculable factor, which is the act of God.

The interpretation which the prophets offered of the history of their people is in substance borne out by the actual course of events. But we are always conscious of a certain gap between the terrors and splendours of the prophetic declarations and the things that actually happened. Indeed the prophets virtually confess that they have had only an incomplete experience of the Kingdom of God, since they always point forward to a great act of judgment and redemption yet to come: a conclusive judgment and a radical renewal of relations between God and man—the coming of His kingdom in power.

WHAT THE NEW TESTAMENT ASSERTS

It is this that the New Testament declares to have happened. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was an immeasurable disaster, in which the rebellion of men against God came to a head, and sin wrote its own condemnation indelibly on the pages of history. His resurrection made out of the disaster itself a source of altogether new spiritual possibilities for men living in this world. By that twofold event, the death and resurrection of Christ, the available range of communion between God and men was enlarged to a point beyond which it is impossible to go. A new era was inaugurated. There was, in fact, a conclusive act of divine judgment and redemption in history. It was the coming of the Kingdom of God.

To say that would seem absurd if we were thinking of the Kingdom of God as a sort of Utopia, or heaven upon earth. But if we think of it (as I have suggested we should) as the assertion of God's kingship over this actual world, in effective dealing with sin and the creation of new possibilities of good, then the testimony not only of the New Testament but of centuries of Christian experience justifies us in saying that the Kingdom of God came with Jesus Christ. It was *foreshadowed* in the crises of Hebrew history, as interpreted by the prophets. But it *came* in the supreme crisis of which the

story is told and interpreted in the New Testament.

The outcome of that crisis, on the historical level, was the Christian Church. A poor enough result, some will think, from so tremendous an event. Indeed, we Christians are a poor lot. I do not know that the first Christians, in the lump, were much better. Yet even when the Church has been at its worst, there has emerged within it a strange power of renewal. The power is God's, not men's. The Apostles turned the world upside down, not by their superior wisdom or virtue, but by their testimony to God: what He is, what He has done for men, and what He is always ready to do. That is the task of the Church at all times. The Church is not the Kingdom of God. It is here to testify that God brought His Kingdom among men in Jesus Christ, by an act of judgment and "new creation." In that act the true meaning and direction of human history stand revealed, and its false meanings and directions stand equally revealed and condemned.

OUR OWN CRISIS

In so far as the Gospel lives in the understanding of men, and shapes their attitude to experience, the succeeding crises of history assume the pattern of that supreme crisis, and reveal the presence of God in them. Again the Kingdom of God comes among men. The calamities of history are seen as the judgment of God upon our wicked ways: within and beyond calamity resides the power which makes all things new.

We are living in such a crisis. It is interpreted to us by the Gospel of the Kingdom of God. The Gospel is firmly rooted in a story of that which once happened. The story is familiar, and too long to tell here. But we should observe that the situation into which Jesus Christ came (the outcome of much previous history) was genuinely typical. The forces with which He came into contact were such as are permanent factors in history: government (in Pilate and the Sanhedrin), institutional religion (in the Pharisees), nationalism (in the Zealots), social unrest (in the poor and dispossessed of Galilee). That is to say, they were of the stuff of our own historical situation. These forces aim at good ends—order, freedom, justice and civilisation. But confronted by Jesus Christ, these representative forces showed themselves to be infected with the inherent vices of a "fallen" humanity, as we know them all too well: pride, ambition and bigotry, cold inhumanity, violence and chicanery, selfishness, greed and spite, and the rest of them. The men who brought Jesus Christ to His death were average men, like ourselves, pursuing (as we do) ends which they thought legitimate, but corrupting their ends (as we do) by the means they used.

The upshot of it all was not only the suffering of an innocent victim. It meant the downfall of a great religious tradition, the sapping of a nation's power to exist, the end of many fine ideals. It was out of the wreck of their faith, their hopes and their virtue that the first believers saw their new world take shape. They confessed, "It is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes."

And now let us look at our own disastrous situation. It would be a false simplification to suggest that it is all due to one man's wickedness. No doubt one man's criminal action released the forces of destruction and precipitated the catastrophe. No doubt some men bear a greater burden of responsibility and guilt than others. But the situation is the outcome of a long course of public actions and policies which in the last analysis represent the attitudes and aims of ordinary men and women in all the countries concerned. These actions could be (and were) defended by their authors in all good faith. They seemed to be demanded by the necessities of the time, and directed to legitimate ends (just like those of Pilate and Caiaphas). But their final result is disaster.

Confronted by the Gospel, this disaster is seen to be the judgment of God upon the way that led to it. Our policies and actions, and the attitudes and aims they represent, have been corrupted by pride, ambition... but why go through the dreary catalogue again? —by just those sins that led to the crucifixion. Not least does the Church itself stand under judgment—like the disciples

who denied and forsook their Master in the crisis of His fate.

So far, then, and on this side, the negative side, of the divine action, there is no difficulty in seeing how the crisis of the crucifixion is reconstituted in our own situation. On the other side, the positive, it is faith, and not a simple observation of the facts, that gives us assurance. The purpose of God in this disaster is to "create a new thing in the earth." The power to create resides already within the disastrous situation, as the power of redemption lay within the crucifixion. For when we say that the disaster is God's judgment, it is implied that although the situation was brought about by human action, it does not lie outside the divine control. God is present in it, and present as King.

What it is that God means to bring out of this disaster, we cannot forecast. It is not necessarily what we should choose, or expect. We are to wait upon His will. There are many complicated factors in the situation. It is a part of our Christian duty to learn all that we can be taught about them by those who are competent to analyse and describe them. But we know that there is another factor, the Kingdom of God; and this is the controlling factor in the last resort. Upon that we rest our hope.

Fifty years ago it seems to have been confidently believed that we were well on the way to the Millennium. "Progress" would see us through. But all the time the evil things were deeply embedded in our civilization, which have now come a head. It ought not to surprise Christian people to find that God's will fulfils itself in a crisis of judgment and new creation, of death and resurrection. We are in at the death. We await the resurrection. Meanwhile we pray, "Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven... For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, for ever and ever."

I have said that we cannot forecast the shape of things to come. But the permanent principle and pattern of God's dealings with men are known to us, and the proper response on our part. For His kingdom is not some apocalyptic consummation which we can imagine only in terms of fantasy. It came in a series of historical events known to us from the New Testament. The story of Jesus, told in the Gospels and interpreted in the Epistles, lets us know the essential character of God in His dealings with men. The teaching of Jesus, again recorded in the Gospels and interpreted in the Epistles, lets us know what our response must be. Those who make that response become points at which the will of God acts in the world.

Anything that we can do will certainly bear the stamp of human imperfection. We are not, as Christians, wiser or better than other men. But we have a God who regards not our offences but the faith of His Church, and uses our imperfect actions for the furtherance of His purpose.

There is a concise and authoritative statement of the Gospel which is applicable now as it was when it was first uttered: "The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe in the Gospel."

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